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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 003031

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SUBJECT: YAR'ADUA: THE LATEST ANOINTED SUCCESSOR?

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) As the race for the presidency in the 2007 elections intensifies, there are indications that Katsina Governor Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua may be the latest "Crown Prince." Yar'Adua is the latest on the list of candidates reportedly "anointed" by the villa to replace President Obasanjo in May ¶2007. Others talked about as Obasanjo's preferred successor include former minister of foreign and internal affairs, Ambassador Babagana Kingibe (also MKO Abiola's running mate in 1993), Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State, former minister of information, Jerry Gana and former military governor of Lagos State, General Buba Marwa. Yar'Adua, who won the gubernatorial elections in Katsina on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in 1999, picked up a PDP presidential nomination form on November 17. END SUMMARY.

YAR'ADUA'S BACKGROUND

¶2. (C) Umaru Yar'Adua, a brother of late Shehu Musa Yar'Adua is a Hausa/Fulani Muslim from the royal family of Katsina Emirate. Yar'Adua comes from the same home state and birthplace as General Muhammadu Buhari, Obasanjo's challenger in 2003 who is also seeking election in 2007. Governor Yar'Adua became governor of Katsina in 1999 largely due to the popularity of his late brother, who died in prison in 1996 during the Abacha regime. He was born in 1951 and was educated at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. He is soft spoken and appears crowd-shy. In his first term, Governor Yar'Adua was well liked for his prudence and populist posture, but he has been less popular during his second term. His support for the controversial bid to extend Obasanjo's tenure caused a decline in his popularity among Northern elite. Although Yar'Adua has made indelible marks on the history of the state, he is politically and physically unknown outside Katsina. He rarely travels out of his official residence in Katsina. There are concerns about his medical condition as he appears emaciated and weighed down by what some term terminal illness.

STYLE OF GOVERNANCE IN KATSINA STATE

¶3. (C) Allegations are rife that Governor Yar'Adua's poor health provided an opportunity for his wife, Turai Yar'Adua, to be the de facto governor of the state. Government

business and contract awards were allegedly carried out through her instructions and without recourse to due process. Although initially known to be firm and strict in conducting state's affairs, Yar'Adua no longer exhibits such assertive behavior.

WHY WOULD OBASANJO CHOOSE HIM?

¶4. (C) A combination of longtime ties with the Yar'Adua family, the governor's unalloyed support during the Third Term imbroglio coupled with certain political calculations must have influenced President Obasanjo to tacitly toy with the idea of throwing his support to Governor Yar'Adua. The governor has remained loyal and respectful to President Obasanjo since coming to office in 1999. He recently played a major role during the controversial plan to extend Obasanjo's tenure. The loyalty and family connection may have attracted the sympathy of the president. It is also possible that Obasanjo will support Yar'Adua as a kind of "Potemkin candidate" to mask another agenda.

¶5. (C) Besides being a northern aristocrat, Governor Yar'Adua is the younger brother of Shehu Yar'Adua, Obasanjo's longtime friend, associate and political ally. Obasanjo's deputy in the late seventies, both Shehu Yar'Adua and Obasanjo were tried and jailed in 1995 for allegedly plotting a coup against Abacha's military junta. Before his death, Shehu was the de facto leader of Nigeria's politics. He founded the most effective political organization in the country, the Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM) which eventually emerged as one of the major groups that formed the

ABUJA 00003031 002 OF 002

Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in 1999. Obasanjo used the same political structure to capture power. However, with the demise of senior Yar'Adua in 1996, Vice President Atiku Abubakar took over as leader and financier of the group. The calculation may be that Governor Yar'Adua's entry into the presidential contest would factionalize or neutralize the influence of Atiku in the PDM camp, since the brother of the group's founder is now in the race.

¶6. (C) Governor Yar'Adua hails from the same state as General Muhammadu Buhari, who is widely popular among the grassroots in the region. Yar'Adua's emergence as PDP flag bearer would likely jeopardize Buhari's chances in the race. Yar'Adua's participation in the upcoming PDP presidential primaries may also hurt the chances of General Ibrahim Babangida and other northerners. Yar'Adua and Babangida are Muslims and northerners. Yar'Adua's presence in the race would further split the votes of the region making it difficult for Babangida to win. The multitude of northern contestants in the PDP may be an orchestrated plan by President Obasanjo to control the selection process, so fracturing the vote to make it impossible for any northern candidate to win the party primary.

¶7. (C) Yar'Adua is also one of the few governors that have not been indicted by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). He is likely to pass through the EFCC's screening before the main election. Obasanjo may support his bid if only to convince Nigerians and the international community about his seriousness in fighting corruption.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Comment: Yar'Adua is merely the latest in a string of candidates talked about around Abuja as the "hand-picked successor to Obasanjo." With only a few short weeks before the PDP National Convention (scheduled for December 16 in Abuja) when the party's slate of candidates will be finalized, President Obasanjo will soon have to make up his mind and publicly signal his support for one of the

contenders if he truly intends leave a successor in his place.

CAMPBELL